

MARRIAGE, PROPERTY AND FEMALE POWER  
IN GERMANIC CULTURE AND GERMANIC HEROIC  
POETRY

A comparative study into the function of marriage, property and female power in Germanic culture and its relation to nine female characters in *Beowulf*, *The Wife's Lament*, the *Poetic Edda* and the *Nibelungenlied*

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## Introduction

The role of women in Medieval literature, including Germanic poetry, is a topic which has received much attention over the years by a great number of scholars including but not limited to Jane Chance, Christine Fell and Jerold C. Frakes. It has been the subject of a number of studies into, for instance, gender role division and power relations, but there is still a lot that can be said about these topics. This study will therefore examine the role of women in Germanic heroic (elegiac) poetry in relation to marriage, property and female power, using *Beowulf*, *The Wife's Lament*, the *Nibelungenlied* and the *Poetic Edda* as examples. While these texts may appear to be chosen at random, this most assuredly is not the case: *The Wife's Lament* represents Anglo-Saxon literature, as does *Beowulf*. *Beowulf* and the Norse-Icelandic *Poetic Edda* arguably have similar origins, whereas the German *Nibelungenlied* is a continuation on/adaptation of a number of poems presented in the *Poetic Edda*. Furthermore, these works have several themes in common, such as loyalty, battle and revenge, and develop along similar lines. All four feature a number of powerful women, whose roles know far more depth than one might initially think. Moreover, this study shall also look to the foundations of marriage, property and female power in Proto-Indo-European, Anglo-Saxon, Norse-Icelandic and German society in order to better be able to examine the role of women in the aforementioned texts in relation to these three aspects.

While there are a great number of publications available on the role of women in Germanic poetry to be found which concern themselves with various aspects such as apparel (Müller), the choice and function of words (Straus) and the importance of property (Frakes; McNamara and Wemple), the discussion presented in these publications is far from complete. What is also interesting is that many of these publications concern themselves with only one or two subdivisions of Germanic poetry: scholars such as Anderson and Gildersleeve will, for instance, compare the *Nibelungenlied* with the *Poetic Edda*, but never tie Anglo-Saxon, Norse-Icelandic and German poetry together. This study will therefore argue that there are more parallels that can be drawn between the women in the four poems mentioned earlier than has been argued so far. By comparing the characters of the woman in *The Wife's Lament*, Hildeburh, Freawaru, Wealhtheow and Modthryth in *Beowulf*, Brünhild and Kriemhild in the *Nibelungenlied*, and Brynhild and Gudrun in the *Poetic Edda*, this study will establish that they not only develop along similar lines, effectively creating an archetype of the Medieval wife, but that due to the circumstances they find themselves in they are effectively the victims

of political machinations within patriarchal societies. Furthermore, this study will also compare the literary role of the wife with that of the wife in Proto-Indo-European, Anglo-Saxon, Norse-Icelandic and Germanic society. To do this, this study will look to three aspects that are present in each text: marriage (incorporating notions such as peace-weaving), property (the foundation of power in any Germanic Medieval society), and female power (the way in which women wield whatever power they are able to obtain).

## Marriage, Property and Female Power in Proto-Indo-European and Germanic Cultures

In order to be able to better examine the role of women in Germanic literature, it is important to first consider their role in Proto-Indo-European and Germanic culture (consisting of Norse-Icelandic, Anglo-Saxon and Medieval German society) around the time the respective texts from each culture were written in order to gain a better understanding of the roles they occupy in literature. The foundations of marriage in Norse-Icelandic, Anglo-Saxon and German society ultimately originate from Proto-Indo-European society, hence its inclusion in this discussion. Furthermore, each era sees both large and small differences in the function of marriage in its society, and so therefore each era will be discussed separately.

### *Proto-Indo-European Society*

The role of women and marriage in Proto-Indo-European society ( $\pm$  4000 BC) has been reconstructed and subsequently thoroughly documented. The society was both hierarchical and patriarchal (Fortson 17), in that there was a clear distinction between social classes where one outranked the other and men were considered to be superior to women. Various kinds of marriage were represented in Indo-European culture (Fortson 18; Gamkrelidze and Ivanov 660; Huld and Mallory 369-370), specifically marriage by abduction and marriage through exchange. However, before investigating these types, it is important to first consider the Proto-Indo-European use of the word ‘marriage’.

Huld and Mallory denote a total of three Indo-European words that refer to marriage, *\*sneubh-* (‘marry’), *ĝemh<sub>x</sub>-* (‘marry’) and *\*h<sub>2</sub>ǵedh(h<sub>x</sub>)-* (‘lead in marriage’) (369). What is surprising is that *\*sneubh-* refers to marriage from the female point of view, whereas *ĝemh<sub>x</sub>-* refers to marriage from the male point of view and may possibly refer to the payment of the so-called bride-price (369). This is in line with Gamkrelidze and Ivanov’s theory that Indo-European terminology refers to marriage as an exchange (658); a bride-price would be paid to the bride’s family in exchange for her hand in marriage (a practice which will be discussed more thoroughly later). However, they also note that “[o]ne ancient Indo-European word pertaining to marriage may have been [*\*h<sub>2</sub>ǵedh(h<sub>x</sub>)-*<sup>1</sup>] ‘lead away, carry off a bride (by force)’” (658). As Fortson concludes, “[the verbs’] use here indicated exogamous and

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of maintaining a sense of coherency, Indo-European words have all been taken from Mallory and Adams’ *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture* as the terms are contained in this work and explained thoroughly.

[patrilocal] marriage where the bride was ‘taken’ or ‘led’ from her father’s family to her husband’s” (18). This would effectively cut all of the bride’s ties to her own community (Gamkrelidze and Ivanov 664). According to Huld and Mallory, *\*h<sub>2</sub>uedh(h<sub>x</sub>)-* also refers to marriage from the male point of view (369). According to them, “Indo-Europeans did not possess a single term for marriage; instead, a number of different verbs were employed for male and female subjects and various aspects of the marriage process” (Huld and Mallory 369), later adding that “[t]he existence of [*\*sneubh-*] points to the fact that the Indo-European couple had markedly divergent marital roles, although it would be unwise to assume that these were necessarily those of dominance and subservience” (369). However, they do not suggest what the alternatives might have been.

As mentioned earlier, Proto-Indo-Europeans recognised various kinds of marriage. Gamkrelidze and Ivanov argue that “[t]he existence of [*\*h<sub>2</sub>uedh(h<sub>x</sub>)-*] points to one form of marriage that did not fall within the system of mutual exchange: marriage by abduction or forceful kidnap of the bride” (659). They list a number of examples of marriage by abduction found in various traditions, such as the Hittite and ancient Greek traditions, believing it to be the earliest form of marriage (Gamkrelidze and Ivanov 659-660). Huld and Mallory agree that marriage by abduction was commonplace in Proto-Indo-European society, but also note the following:

[Gamkrelidze and Ivanov] have suggested that the verbal root *\*h<sub>2</sub>uedh(h<sub>x</sub>)-*, commonly translated as ‘lead away (in marriage),’ expressed rather greater force and that abduction may have been the earliest form of marriage. As some institution of marriage is likely to have long predated the form of the [Proto-Indo-European] community, it is much more likely that marriage by abduction, still practiced into the present century, was always an option but hardly the earliest known in [Proto-Indo-European] society. (370)

Furthermore, they also refer to another scholar, and by doing so offer a different approach to the concept of marriage by abduction:

Eric Hamp has suggested that we can recover (at least) four terms relating to the institution of marriage in [Proto-Indo-European]. The well-attested root *\*prek̂* ‘ask, beg,’ also carries the specific meaning of ‘initiate a proposal or marriage’ . . . This would be followed by the exchange of presents, the *\*uedmo-* ‘bride-price’. As part of the wedding the bride would be literally led away into matrimony, i.e., *\*h<sub>2</sub>uedh(h<sub>x</sub>)-* ‘lead (into marriage)’. Finally, he argues that *gemh<sub>x</sub>-* is more precisely translated ‘consummate a marriage’ which may well explain the particular bias of this word towards males in the various [Indo-European] stocks. (qtd. in Huld and Mallory 369)

Hamp's theory seems to revolve less around forcible abduction than it does around the literal act of leading the bride away into matrimony (a concept which, in this context, seems somewhat reminiscent of a modern-day walk down the aisle). *\*h<sub>2</sub>yedh(h<sub>x</sub>)-*, however, does seem to be commonly linked to marriage by abduction: the word 'abduction' implies that a woman's consent certainly was not necessary for a marriage to take place, thus painting a far less peaceful picture than Hamp has done while also re-establishing male superiority over women. As Frakes states, marriage by abduction is "a form of marriage common to patriarchal societies in which the groom-to-be forcibly abducts the woman from her male guardians, if he is strong enough to do so; if not, they kill him or drive him away" (155). Frakes is the only one to claim that failure would result in death. It is, however, a reasonable assumption: the very word 'abduction' does not imply that the bride nor her family are willing participants.

Another form of marriage was one of exchange. According to Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, *\*h<sub>2</sub>yedh(h<sub>x</sub>)-* "eventually lost its original meaning 'abduct' in the individual historical dialects and became the general word for marriage, so that other derivatives pertaining to the terminology of marriage as exchange were derived from it" (660). This marriage of exchange often involved a *\*yedmo-* or bride-price, a compensation for the loss of a daughter, paid by the groom or the groom's family to the bride's family (Fortson 18; Huld 82). Huld also notes that there is no such thing as a Proto-Indo-European dowry, a practice with which the bride-price is often mistaken (83). The nature of the bride-price, however, remains unclear, although Frakes argues that it was "[a purchase price] whereby the husband acquired control over her, her body, and her legal rights and obligations" (60). Gamkrelidze and Ivanov see the possible existence of two kinds of marriage in Proto-Indo-European culture as characteristic of their "migration to new territories and consequent contact with foreign tribes" (660). They conclude that "[t]he basic form of intermarriage with foreign tribes in such circumstances could have been abduction, while the rites of marriage by exchange were observed within one's own tribe or related tribes, since relations with members of one's own tribe were regulated by a complex system of social conventions" (Gamkrelidze and Ivanov 660).

#### *Norse-Icelandic Culture*

The role of women in Norse-Icelandic culture (ranging from approximately the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> century) differs somewhat from their role in Proto-Indo-European society. Þorláksson argues for a clear distinction between a woman's private and public role in Icelandic society. He

argues that “[w]omen were not supposed to perform in the political arena” (141), a conclusion shared by Karlsson (515). Þorláksson later adds that women did have a considerable role to play in the domestic sphere:

Women were not without influence, however: they could make their presence felt and sometimes even had the last word. For one thing, women were supposed to be in charge in the home, within its walls, taking care of day-to-day affairs. For another, their function as intermediaries between their husbands and homes on the one hand and their own close relatives on the other put them in an important position.  
(Þorláksson 141)

Þorláksson also notes the appearance of what he calls “strong women” in literature, drawing a parallel between these fictional characters and the real women they were supposedly based on: “[a]n ideal housewife was one who would step in when her husband was away from home and take over its management. ‘Strong women’ were able to do exactly that; furthermore, they incited men to act against their enemies; it seems that it was the role of women to goad men to take revenge, often in cases where an agreement had been reached” (141). Jochens, on the other hand, suggests that the presence of these inciters in literature had at one point become so common that it was a literary motif rather than a representation of actual women (“Norse Women” 733), adding that motifs such as these “reveal less about women’s real lives in Norse society than about the male authors’ perceptions of females” (“Norse Women” 733).

Marriage in Old Norse-Icelandic society seems to have functioned in largely similar ways as it did in Proto-Indo-European society. According to Jochens, both marriage by abduction (referred to by her as *Raubehe*) and marriage through exchange (which she calls *Kaufehe*) were commonplace (*Women in Old Norse Society* 17). In relation to marriage by abduction, Jochens states that “[d]uring periods of wandering and endemic warfare men undoubtedly committed rape and other physical violence to obtain women and establish exogamous relationships. Some of these unions may have resulted in permanent marital relationships” (*Women in Old Norse Society* 17). In light of this study, however, marriage through exchange or *Kaufehe* is perhaps of greater interest: as Jochens writes, “[t]he German expression *Kaufehe* captures the essential features of a woman’s role and status in a pagan marriage, for it suggests the fundamental connection between marriage and property” (*Women in Old Norse Society* 20). Here she of course refers to the payment of a bride-price, a prerequisite for a marriage through exchange. According to Jochens, *Kaufehe* was designed to control the flow of property, and any restrictions placed on marriage had to do with just that: “[o]nly individuals who were ‘an equal match’ (*jafnræði*) could marry. The term refers to

both social prestige and to wealth, although the sagas suggest that an excess of the latter could compensate for deficiency in the former” (*Women in Old Norse Society* 21).

What is of particular interest, however, is the distinction Jochens makes between pagan and Christian marriage. While pagan marriage served to control the flow of property and the avoidance of any incestuous practices (*Women in Old Norse Society* 23), the arrival of Christianity in the late 10<sup>th</sup>/early 11<sup>th</sup> century expanded upon this notion: “[c]hurchmen applied their specific principles of monogamy, fidelity, consent and indissolubility to this model, expanded incest limits, and added ceremonial instructions for weddings” (Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* 37). Yet while churchmen were in favour of the indissolubility of marriage, pagan marriage had allowed room for this and divorce continued to be commonplace (Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* 37). Interestingly enough, there were four conditions under which a divorce could take place, two of which had to do with property: poverty and theft of a wife’s property by her husband (Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* 55-56). Yet despite of its introduction of new ideals, or perhaps because of this, pagan marriage prevailed over its Christian counterpart:

Christianity succeeded in effecting only minor changes on ancient marriage in Iceland, which had been established by the colonists on the Norwegian pattern. Among leading families, especially, Christian marriages continued to seal reconciliation between two families by transferring wealth and a woman, thus retaining the pagan character of a political and commercial contract. (Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* 52)

#### *Anglo-Saxon England*

The Anglo-Saxon era (ranging from approximately the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> century) marked the first beginnings of change in what up until now has been a fairly stark delineation of the female role within society, noticeable in literature as well as both canon and common law, as will be discussed later. The role of women in Anglo-Saxon literature, however, has unfortunately remained small. As Fell points out, “[n]either sex nor marriage is central to Old English literature, and romance plays a very small part. Heroic literature, however, reveals occasional glimpses of the role of wife, daughter or betrothed” (66). In literature, perhaps one of the most important roles a woman could play is the one of the so-called *freoðuwebbe* or peace-weaver. In fact, it is the only female role for which marriage is absolutely vital. In relation to heroic poetry in general, the role of a peace-weaver may be defined as follows:

Heroic poetry in particular is much concerned with the vulnerability of the woman cast in the role of *freoðuwebbe*, ‘peace-weaver,’ where it is hoped that a peace-

settlement between two hostile tribes or families may be made firmer by a marriage-bond. The emphasis is on the isolation of such an individual in a society where the protection of her own family has been replaced by the dislike and distrust of those in her new environment. (Fell 37)

Little is said about the origins of the practice of peace-weaving, although the practice itself is reminiscent of Jochens' statement in relation to Old Norse-Icelandic marriage of the transference of a woman as a means to cement an agreement (*Women in Old Norse Society* 52). As such, the question remains in how far these peace-weavers are representative of the role of women in Anglo-Saxon society.

Unlike their literary counterparts, Anglo-Saxon women were far better represented when it came to legal matters. Hough examined two texts in relation to marriage in Anglo-Saxon society, namely Æthelberht's law-code (dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> century) and a text commonly known as *Be Wifmannes Beweddunge* or *On the Betrothal of a Woman* (dated to the late 10<sup>th</sup> or early 11<sup>th</sup> century) (177), and concludes that these two texts have various elements in common. She notes that "[c]omparison of the two texts would suggest that marriage law remained remarkably stable throughout the Anglo-Saxon period" (Hough 177-178). However, what is perhaps most striking is that the elements Hough refers to seem to be more beneficial to the woman in question rather than the man: for example, both texts refer to the payments the man owes the woman, denoting both a monetary payment and the so-called *morgengifu* or morning gift. McNamara and Wemple refer to the aforementioned monetary payment as 'bridegift,' which was often a piece of land, stating that "[t]he woman continued to be an object of value for which her suitor was expected to pay a price, but the price itself moved through a series of steps into the hands of the woman rather than those of her family" (86). They also note that "[i]n England, the practice of giving the parents or the guardian a payment was abolished by Cnut (1016-1035), who ruled: 'No woman or maiden shall ever be forced to marry a man whom she dislikes, nor shall she ever be given for money unless the suitor wishes to give something of his own free will'" (86). In addition to the bridegift, a bride was also given a morning gift, which she received after the consummation of her marriage: "[t]hat settlement usually consisted of real property, and customs varied as to whether she held the usufruct or had outright possession of the gift. Through the bridegift and the morning gift, women were able to acquire impressive personal domains and concomitant economic and political power" (McNamara and Wemple 87). Furthermore, the two law texts cited by Hough also refer to the rights of a widow (177). It can therefore be said that, as Fell also states, "[l]iterature and law alike suggest that the woman's role within marriage in Anglo-Saxon

England had, at any rate for the free-born, immense potential” (71), a notion supported by Stafford who notes that, beginning in the late 9<sup>th</sup> and early 10<sup>th</sup> century, Anglo-Saxon noble women began gaining more influence (65). According to her, “[they] had rights of possession and free disposal of land” (Stafford 65), and as such were able to wield a considerable amount of political power.

There are also examples of Anglo-Saxon monarchs implementing marriage as a means to secure a political alliance: “West Saxon kings were keen on tying up their dynasty with continental aristocrats” (Bremmer 379). For instance, both King Ælfred the Great (c. 849-899) and his son Edward the Elder (c. 874-924) married off their daughters to both lower and upper nobility (Bremmer 379). Yet this practice was not limited to a king’s daughters alone: according to Stafford, “[k]ings chose their wives with an eye to political advantage” (61). The advantage in question was often to gain enough power to be able to overcome rebels or invading forces. It is also interesting to note that, according to McNamara and Wemple, marriage by abduction was very much a reality amongst Germanic tribes (85). However, while there are ample instances of marriage being used to secure a political alliance, to ensure the continuation of a dynasty or to protect a king’s own property, there is no mention of marriage serving as actual peace-weaving: while there are a number of examples to be found within literature, it would seem that peace-weaving as an actual practice is scarcely, if at all, documented. As such, it can be said that the literary representation of marriage differs greatly from its legal representation, and that the role of women in literature is therefore not necessarily representative of that of women in Anglo-Saxon society.

### *Medieval Germany*

Perhaps the most significant changes to the institute of marriage in Germanic culture took place between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century, so too in German society. As Murdoch states, the political responsibilities of any Medieval king may be summarised as follows:

to maintain order and stability within the land or society over which the king rules; to defend that country, society, economy against threats or incursion from others; and, where necessary or possible, to enlarge the territories or spheres of influence of that land or society by force, alliance or marriage, thus increasing its economic prosperity and its relative importance. (229)

While most of these aspects of a king’s responsibilities are not necessarily relevant for this discussion, Murdoch’s summary does reveal both the purpose and importance of marriage in

any Medieval society: the expansion of power. Yet as McNamara and Wemple note, several other factors became important as well in relation to marriage: from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards, one such factor was lineage (88). Furthermore, a woman's property and power acquired before her marriage became important as well: "[a] woman's opportunities to achieve a position of power through marriage were increasingly enhanced as time went on if she controlled inherited property of her own" (McNamara and Wemple 89). As such, the 10<sup>th</sup> century was one in which women stood to gain more power and property, not merely through marriage but also through inheritance. Furthermore, Frakes distinguishes between two kinds of marriage which he calls *mnt*-marriage and *Friedelehe*, formal and informal marriage (59). The circumstances surrounding a formal *mnt*-marriage seem to be largely similar to that of Hamp's theory on Proto-Indo-European marriage by abduction as described earlier, whereas the informal *Friedelehe* differs greatly from this: the most notable difference was that no bride-price was paid (Frakes 62). Frakes also notes that "[i]n such cases the [morning gift] itself was the sign of actual marriage (distinguishing it from concubinage)" (62).

From the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards, however, female power was greatly diminished. There are several causes for this. According to McNamara and Wemple, "the imposition of celibacy and the prohibition of lay investiture restricted the power of the family, and therefore of women" (95). They also look to the exclusion of women from inheritance as one of the causes: "[i]n 1037, Konrad II issued the *Constitutio de feudis*, excluding women from the inheritance of fiefs" (McNamara and Wemple 95). As McNamara and Wemple conclude, the female right to inherit fiefs was only partially restored in 1156 (95), meaning that they often still did not inherit any rights whatsoever. However, the negative economic consequences did not stop here: the exclusion of women from the inheritance of fiefs once more established male superiority in society. McNamara and Wemple argue the following:

As the idea of primogeniture and the indivisibility of the patrimony was again entrenched, the daughters of the nobility suffered a severe diminution of their rights. A daughter's claim on the inheritance gradually gave way to the dowry provided by her family at the time of her marriage, the *maritagium*. (96)

A dowry, however, is traditionally given to the husband by the bride and her family. As such, a woman's rights were severely restricted now that she no longer stood to gain anything. Furthermore, the aforementioned bridegift, also known in Anglo-Saxon society, became a dower over the course of the late 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries (McNamara and Wemple 96). As has been mentioned earlier, the bridegift usually belonged to the woman and was hers to do with

as she pleased. By the time it was transformed into a dower, however, “fewer deeds gave the wife outright ownership, and even the usufruct was generally restricted to the use of the husband and wife jointly, not to the wife exclusively” (McNamara and Wemple 96). In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the circumstances surrounding a dower were changed once more: “[a dower arrangement] gave a widow the usufruct of a portion, usually one-third, of her husband’s patrimony. She was thus provided for in case of her husband’s decease but her economic independence during his lifetime, and, to some extent, after his death, had vanished” (McNamara and Wemple 96). The practice of the morning gift or *morgengâbe* as it was known in Middle High German, however, seems to have been kept intact: “already by the seventh century it was often usufruct of land or outright gift of real property, which after the death of the husband did not revert to his relations” (Frakes 60). There is no mention of the practice transforming into another arrangement or disappearing altogether.

A final change came in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. As Gentry writes:

the free aristocracy was either becoming impoverished or unable to reproduce male heirs (generally both conditions prevailed) and saw itself compelled to strike up alliances through marriage with wealthy members of the ministerial class, who . . . were among the wealthiest and most powerful nobles in the empire. (70)

While marriage in this case would serve once more as a means to secure both wealth as well as the continuation of a dynasty, the aristocracy was less than pleased with its predicament: “since [the ministerial class’s] origins a century or more previous were unfree, the conservative nobility viewed any intermarriage with even the wealthiest ministerial as a *mésalliance*” (Gentry 70-71). Yet as McNamara and Wemple point out, “by the twelfth century, public power was gradually being recaptured from the great aristocratic families by kings and princes” (96). One of the consequences of this was that the aristocracy had to find new means to retain even a semblance of their power: men were able to occupy certain public positions, but these were not open to women (McNamara and Wemple 97). As Frakes states, “as charismatic and lineage-based rule disappeared in favour of a rule-governed proto-bureaucracy, the domestic unit and all its appurtenances became a private matter” (56). As such, it can be argued that although there had been an increase of female power in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the centuries that followed it saw a remarkable decline.

## *Beowulf*

Beowulf, an Anglo-Saxon poem most likely written somewhere between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century and included in the so-called Nowell Codex (British Library Cotton Vitellius A.xv), is of particular interest in light of the research into the importance of marriage in Germanic literature. The poem mentions a total of eleven women, and while only five of these women have names (Wealhtheow<sup>2</sup>, Hildeburh, Freawaru, Modthryth and Hygd; Dockray-Miller 84), only four of them (all but Hygd, as too little is mentioned with regard to her marriage to Hygelac) can be considered to be peace-weavers. Yet even this remains highly debatable amongst scholars. Some argue that Wealhtheow, Hildeburh, Modthryth and Freawaru are indeed peace-weavers (Dockray-Miller 83-106; Orchard 77-79), while others exclude Modthryth from this list because of the behaviour she displays prior to being married (all those who dare look upon her are put to death; Chance 4; Porter). Others, such as Wodzak, argue that Wealhtheow, Hildeburh and Freawaru are peace-weavers, but also include the *scop* in their list of peace-weavers (258-260). She argues that, through their marriage and efforts to maintain peace, peace-weavers “attempt to preserve culture” (Wodzak 260), but also considers the *scop* to be a “spokesman for his society’s values, the repository of its knowledge” (Wodzak 261). In this line of reasoning, both a peace-weaver and a *scop* have similar functions. Yet the stories the *scop* tells also have their function: according to Wodzak, they demonstrate the *scop*’s knowledge of peace-weavers (261), as reflected in, for instance, Hildeburh’s role in the Finnsburh episode. In an attempt to create some sort of order in this chaos, it will be argued that Hildeburh, Freawaru, Wealhtheow and Modthryth are most certainly peace-weavers: through their respective marriages, each strives to create and preserve peace between two tribes. Furthermore, they will be discussed in this specific order: Hildeburh and Freawaru fail in their efforts as peace-weaver, Wealhtheow is somewhat successful, and Modthryth is perhaps the most successful of all. Finally, the role of marriage, property and power will be examined for each of these women, demonstrating that they too are the victims of the machinations of men.

### *Hildeburh*

While it is not explicitly stated that Hildeburh is a peace-weaver, the circumstances described in the Finnsburh episode in *Beowulf* do depict her as one (Hill 240): she is an exogamous

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<sup>2</sup> This remains debatable: as will be explained later, Wealhtheow is not a name but a nickname.

bride, a Danish woman married to the lord of the Frisians, and in line with Fell's definition of a peace-weaver<sup>3</sup> as discussed earlier, the focus seems to be solely on Hildeburh's solitary experiences: she is portrayed as a victim whose son, brother and husband die during a Danish attack on the Frisians. Furthermore, she is called such things as "bereft and blameless" (*Beowulf* l. 1073) and a "woman in shock, waylaid by grief" (*Beowulf* l. 1075). Finally, the poet mourns Hildeburh's fate by adding the following: "Hoc's daughter – how could she not / lament her fate when morning came / and the light broke on her murdered dears?" (*Beowulf* ll. 1076-1078). As such, the emphasis seems to be on Hildeburh's loss and emotional distress. The rest of the Finnsburh episode in *Beowulf* is devoted to the fight and feud between the Danes and Frisians. Hildeburh is effectively trapped in the middle of this, her powerlessness expressed through her silence (apart from wailing at her son's and brother's funeral she does not utter a single word). Because of her unique position in this feud, Hildeburh is the one who stands to lose the most (Hill 241): she does not just lose her loved ones, but she also loses her newfound home as the Danes take her back to Denmark with them. As Hill states, she is "reduced to the status of an object, as if she were part of the booty of war" (241). It could be reasoned that the spoils of war are Hildeburh's to do with as she pleases as she is Finn's widow and they would therefore be hers by default, but instead both she and her property are taken back to Denmark by her kinsmen. Porter argues that "Hildeburh's story illustrates the conflict between the peaceweaver's marriage tribe and birth tribe, and an answer (at least within the society of the poem) of which one was to take precedence" (Porter). She later concludes that "[t]he poet does not mention any grief resulting from the death of her husband, nor does he register any wish on her part that the murders of son and brother *not* be avenged. This indicates Hildeburh's continuing close relationship to her birth people" (Porter). However, Hildeburh's silence concerning the death of her son and brother does not necessarily mean that she has chosen her kinsmen over her marital kin. Furthermore, as there is no clear statement regarding her kinsmen's sentiment towards her, it could be reasoned that Hildeburh may have used her inheritance to attract warriors to her, thus possibly posing a new threat to the Danes. This would also have meant that Hildeburh would have occupied a position in society usually reserved for men, and that to uphold the structural unity of the patriarchal Anglo-Saxon society she is therefore taken back to Denmark.

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<sup>3</sup> "Heroic poetry in particular is much concerned with the vulnerability of the woman cast in the role of *freoduwebbe*, 'peace-weaver,' where it is hoped that a peace-settlement between two hostile tribes or families may be made firmer by a marriage-bond. The emphasis is on the isolation of such an individual in a society where the protection of her own family has been replaced by the dislike and distrust of those in her new environment" (Fell 37).

The function of Hildeburh's appearance in the Finnsburh episode also remains a highly debated topic. Some, like Cooke, argue that Hildeburh is "intended as a foil to Wealhtheow" (195), while others, such as McFadden, consider her story to be a parallel to that of Wealhtheow in terms of social ranking (637). It seems unlikely that Hildeburh is merely a foil: while the negative outcome of her story does contrast with the considerably more positive story of Wealhtheow in that Wealhtheow arguably wields her political influence to greater effect (as will be discussed further on), there seems to be more to the Finnsburh episode than meets the eye. Wodzak and Hill both argue that Hildeburh's story serves to highlight the conflict between the world of men and the world of women: Wodzak states that "[the peace-weavers'] ability to weave together all that they hold dear is undermined by the heroic code. Yet it is also clear that their ability to weave depends on the heroic behaviour of their men. The heroic code both supports and destroys their society" (259). In other words, the peace-weavers attempt to create peace in a world ruled by the heroic code. As soon as those following the heroic code decide to undermine the peace-weavers' efforts by, in this case, renewing a feud, the peace-weavers' efforts are in vain and their world destroyed. As such, Hildeburh's appearance in the Finnsburh episode illustrates the temporal state of the peace she has created through her marriage, as well as the disastrous consequences of the clash between the heroic world of men and the peaceful world of women, and the triumph of the former over the latter. Hill, on the other hand, expands upon this notion and sees Hildeburh as "a figure of inaction and isolation, a victim of the destructive forces of 'heroism,' and a witness to the degradation of treasure – and of human (female) life – to the level of mere plunder" (241). It would seem that Hildeburh is not only a victim then but a commodity as well, first implemented to maintain peace and taken back by force when she has outlived her purpose. In light of this, it can be argued that Hildeburh is the most traditional representation of a peace-weaver. As Chance argues, "women who fulfil this ideal role in Anglo-Saxon literature are usually depicted as doomed and tragic figures, frequently seen as weeping or suffering – we think of Hildeburh bemoaning the loss of her son and her brother, torn between the pulls of two tribes" (10). Dockray-Miller elaborates on this, also looking to Hildeburh's name as representation of this conflict: "Hildeburh becomes, in the brevity of her shocking narrative of loss, a 'battle-town' or 'war-fortification,' for these literal translations of her name show how feud has imbedded herself in her maternal body, how inescapable violence is for her" (99). Chance later concludes that "[i]t appears that the very passivity of the bride and peace pledge leads inexorably to disaster" (Chance 10). Hildeburh

is arguably the most passive of the peace-weavers mentioned in *Beowulf*, as will become clear in the remainder of this discussion.

### *Freawaru*

Freawaru occupies a unique position in *Beowulf*, in that the events surrounding her marriage and role as peace-weaver have not actually taken place yet. When Beowulf returns to his lord Hygelac and recounts his adventures in Denmark, he also mentions Freawaru, Hrothgar and Wealhtheow's daughter who does not make an actual appearance in the narrative itself. As Porter argues, "Beowulf's description of Freawaru is fairly incidental to the story; she mainly serves as a way of introduction to the conflict" (Porter). However, it could be argued that Freawaru's presence serves as a reminder of the peace-weaver's future plight: she is arguably the last peace-weaver to be mentioned in the narrative, thus drawing attention to the uncertain future of not only the Danes, but of the future of peace-weavers as well. Freawaru is introduced as follows:

I heard the company call her Freawaru  
as she made her rounds, presenting men  
with the gem-studded bowl, young bride-to-be  
to the gracious Ingeld, in her gold-trimmed attire.  
The friend of the Shieldings favours her betrothal:  
the guardian of the kingdom sees good in it  
and hopes this woman will heal old wounds  
and grievous feuds. But generally the spear  
is prompt to retaliate when a prince is killed,  
no matter how admirable the bride may be (*Beowulf* ll. 2022-2031).

Beowulf predicts that Freawaru's marriage to Ingeld will fail in its purpose, and that the Heathobards (Ingeld's people) will not accept this peace-pledge. Instead, Beowulf argues, the feuds between the Danes and Heathobards will be renewed as Freawaru will inevitably fail in her role as peace-weaver. According to Orchard, Freawaru's predicted failure "is seen as unexceptional" (79). While he does not elaborate on this statement it is reminiscent of Chance's observation "that the very passivity of the bride and peace pledge leads inexorably to disaster" (10). Moreover, as Kinch argues, "the episode surely demonstrates Freawaru's lack of agency"<sup>4</sup> (138), a notion supported by Sklute (206). She is a helpless pawn in the machinations of men, unable to decide her own fate, even though it is difficult to comment on

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<sup>4</sup> The ability to act independently.

her passivity because of the brevity of her appearance in the poem. Kinch later adds the following:

Far from being a ‘casual’ narration, the passage represents, through intensive poetic craft, an insightful moment in the psychology of the husband who receives a peace-bride. Freawaru inherently carries a dual, and conflicted, signification for Ingeld as an emblem of a personal bond jeopardised by her social significance as a token of political exchange (Kinch 139).

As such, Freawaru represents the dual nature of a peace-weaver. On the one hand she represents a promise of peace, but on the other she is a constant reminder of the feud in the first place. The only aspect that makes her a more successful peace-weaver than Hildeburh is the fact that her marriage has not taken place yet - moreover, as it has not yet come to pass, little can be said about her role in relation to property and female power. Her future failure would imply that she is relatively powerless, or at the very least unable to wield her power in the way her mother wields hers. It stands to reason that her marriage would involve many of the elements discussed in relation to Anglo-Saxon marriage, in that it would most likely involve a bridegift and/or morning gift, but whether or not Freawaru would be able to take control of these and through them gain at least a semblance of power remains questionable.

### *Wealhtheow*

What is perhaps most striking about Wealhtheow, regardless of the circumstances under which she appears in *Beowulf*, is her name, which translates as ‘foreign slave’ (Orchard 77). Jurasinski argues for a more thorough analysis of the name Wealhtheow. The name consists of two parts, *wealh-* and *-theow*, and the problem lies not so much with the latter as it does with the former. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *wealh-* can refer to four things: foreigner, slave, Briton or Welsh (“Welsh, adj. and n.”). Yet as Jurasinski states, “[t]he popularity of *wealh-* as a name element<sup>5</sup>, and the indeterminacy of its semantic range, effectively nullify its usefulness regarding Wealhtheow’s history” (713). Regardless of the exact meaning of *wealh-*, however, it can be argued that it in any case refers to something foreign which did not naturally have a place in the Danish court. In relation to her role as peace-weaver, this interpretation does have a certain merit to it: as a peace-weaver she would of course be an exogamous bride and so would originate from another region. Furthermore,

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<sup>5</sup> Jurasinski here refers to Cecily Clark, who has identified a number of historical figures whose name incorporated the name element *wealh-*: “[t]he seventh and eighth centuries, however, saw a king of Sussex called *Aðelwealh*, one of Wessex called *Cenwealh*, one of the Magonsæte (a tribe settled in the Welsh marshes) called *Merewealh* and a Sussex king’s-thegn called *Wealhhere*, amongst others” (qtd. in Jurasinski 706).

there does not seem to be any direct negative connotation to her name, as “no one actually addresses her this way; it seems to be the nickname given to her by the Danish court, where she has presumably fetched up after being married off from another land as a so-called ‘peace-weaver’” (Orchard 77). The other element of Wealhtheow’s name, *-theow*, is perhaps more important. It literally means ‘slave,’ which implies inferiority, subservience and servitude, qualities which are defining for Wealhtheow both as a woman and as a queen. Her role in *Beowulf* is rather small: she is mentioned a few times and appears only twice throughout the narrative. However, she is also the only woman who speaks and is arguably the most important woman in the poem (Dockray-Miller 106). She first enters the story when a banquet is held in Beowulf’s honour prior to his fight with Grendel. Here she acts as a hostess (Porter), in that she acts according to what is expected of her as queen – she offers Hrothgar and the rest of the court, including Beowulf, a drink. He thanks her and declares his intentions, thus making her vital in the identification of the hero in the narrative. Her second appearance is of greater importance for her role as peace-weaver. It almost directly follows the Finnsburh episode and marks Wealhtheow’s attempt to exert her influence as queen on the line of succession. Grendel has just been defeated, and during the celebrations that follow, Wealhtheow addresses her husband:

The bright court of Heorot has been cleansed  
and now the word is that you want to adopt  
this warrior [Beowulf] as a son. So, while you may,  
bask in your fortune, and then bequeath  
kingdom and nation to your kith and kin,  
before your decease. (*Beowulf* ll. 1174-1179)

Not only does Wealhtheow attempt to undermine Hrothgar’s plans, but she also proposes another candidate, Hrothulf, who will look out for her sons, Hrethric and Hrothmund. Her suggestion, however, goes unanswered. She then resumes her duties as a hostess, bestowing gifts upon Beowulf and thanking him for his efforts, even though according to Dockray-Miller, she resents that he is so clearly favoured by her husband (112). However, the act of rewarding Beowulf for his efforts indicates that Wealhtheow does have some sort of power, both thanking and ensuring future loyalty. Yet while she does so in her husband’s name as she will always be his subordinate, it is not clear whether she is handing out his treasure or her private possessions by way of her bridegift and/or morning gift.

Wealhtheow’s intended interference in court politics is an issue which has resulted in much debate. Orchard proposes that she is nothing more than “a helpless pawn in the power

politics of the time” (77), effectively reducing her to a figurehead. However, McFadden seems to think that Wealhtheow has a much more “active and politically subtle role” (637). He comes to the conclusion that “Wealhtheow foresees a power struggle with Hrothulf on one side and Hrethric and Hrothmund on the other” (McFadden 638). As such, her speech becomes an attempt to avert this possible calamity, a notion supported by Straus who argues that “Wealhtheow’s careful choice of the right words at the right time shows a recognition of her responsibility to speak out” (349). A serious weakness with this argument, however, is that no one pays Wealhtheow any heed (Orchard 77), and that it would therefore seem that, rather than assuming an “active and politically subtle role,” her powerlessness is only emphasised. This argument is opposed by Porter, who argues that “the poet gives no indication that her words were ignored or not accepted into consideration by Hrothgar” (Porter). However, he does not explicitly acknowledge her either. While that which is not said can sometimes be just as important as or perhaps even more important than that which is said, it remains conjecture. Yet what may lie at the core of Wealhtheow’s speech is a female attempt at (political) control in a predominantly male society. However, the very definition of Wealhtheow’s name, not to mention the complete lack of response her actions inspire, effectively destine Wealhtheow to failure. Sklute, however, argues differently:

Wealhtheow recognises that there might be trouble in the line of inheritance to the Danish throne after Hrothgar’s death. Very early in the poem the audience is made aware of the future family feud between the sons and the nephew of Hrothgar that will ultimately cause the destruction of Heorot and of the Danish royal line (207).

While this does allow for a more politically active role for Wealhtheow, she does speak highly of Hrothulf in her speech:

I am certain of Hrothulf.  
He is noble and will use the young ones well.  
He will not let you down. Should you die before him,  
he will treat our children truly and fairly. (*Beowulf* ll. 1179-1182)

Unless Wealhtheow is resorting to irony here, it would seem that the only one who not only foresees this, addresses it and attempts to rectify it is the one person who is ignored consistently throughout the poem, thus rendering every effort on her part meaningless. Cooke, on the other hand, considers Wealhtheow’s speech to be an ingenious one. According to him, Wealhtheow could not possibly give any credence to Hrothgar’s alleged adoption of Beowulf: instead she “seizes on Hrothgar’s speech to Beowulf as an opportunity to announce her

misgivings to the feasters in Heorot and to press publicly for her sons' rights after their father's death, while still avoiding an open breach with Hrothulf" (Cooke 181). This is perhaps the most satisfactory explanation, although its implications remove any political sway Wealhtheow might enjoy: she is simply stating the obvious, a repetition of arrangements made before which is ignored by those present. As such, she is once more reduced to a state of powerlessness.

### *Modthryth*

Modthryth's tale is perhaps one of the most intriguing ones to be included in *Beowulf*, one of power and the contrast between male and female power. A mere 31 lines, it tells the story of a woman<sup>6</sup> who would have any man who dared look upon her put to death. Her behaviour changes when she marries Offa, a king from another region. Rather than be known for her bloodthirsty ways, she is now known for her good deeds. She is not explicitly mentioned as being a peace-weaver, but there are two elements in her story which depict her as one. First, there is the *Beowulf*-poet's comment on what he understands to be proper queenly behaviour: "[a] queen should weave peace, not punish the innocent / with loss of life for imagined insult" (*Beowulf* ll. 1942-1943). He clearly contrasts Modthryth's behaviour with how she ought to behave, explicitly stating that she should strive towards effecting peace. Furthermore, in Old English the word *freoðuwebbe*, 'peace-weaver,' is used here. Secondly, the circumstances surrounding her marriage to Offa are similar to those of a peace-weaver: "[a] bride arrayed / in her gold finery, given away / by a caring father, ferried to her young prince / over dim seas" (*Beowulf* ll. 1948-1951). The exogamous nature of her marriage is illustrated here, as is the fact that the marriage was not of her own choosing but rather orchestrated by her father.

Nevertheless, there are some who do not consider Modthryth to be an authentic peace-weaver at all. Chance, for instance, argues that the use of *freoðuwebbe* is intended ironically, as Modthryth's initial behaviour clearly opposes the expected behaviour of any peace-weaver (4), a notion supported by Sklute (208). Critics such as Dockray-Miller, on the other hand, argue for a more feminist reading of Modthryth's story: "she cannot merely be dismissed as an evil queen who becomes good after marrying the right man. She is neither a reformed peace pledge nor a heroic Valkyrie. Instead, her character both confirms and denies a masculine economy that depends on women as commodities" (79). This of course refers to the twofold nature of Modthryth's story. In the first half she does not only act as the antithesis

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<sup>6</sup> Possibly a princess (Porter).

of a peace-weaver, but also as that of women throughout *Beowulf*: not content to idly sit by, she takes matters into her own hands and commits numerous acts of violence (or at the very least has these carried out in her name). According to Dockray-Miller, “[Modthryth<sup>7</sup>], in the first half of her story – and in the second half, though less obviously – not only disrupts the construction of gender in the poem but manages to take control of it briefly” (83). Her marriage to Offa, however, forces her into the traditional role of woman and peace-weaver. Lines 1948 to 1951 of *Beowulf*, as quoted before, state that Modthryth is married off to Offa by her father. While this would seem to be an affirmation of Modthryth’s conformity and of the patriarchal nature of Anglo-Saxon society, some seem to think differently:

Most important is her success in that marriage [to Offa]. [Modthryth] rebels against the system by succeeding in its terms, terms that are set up to ensure women’s failure within the terms of patriarchal society. In a society that values war, killing, violence, and glory in battle, the peace-weaver actually strives against everything the society values . . . [Modthryth]’s supposed acquiescence to the status quo actually undermines it; her success as a queen (not a peace pledge predestined to failure) defies the system that devalues yet necessitates the woman as peace weaver (Dockray-Miller 87).

However, this does not take into consideration the clear demarcation of Modthryth’s new role as peace-weaver as well as queen by the poet. As such, her success as queen and as peace-weaver are inextricably linked: if she succeeds as queen, she succeeds as peace-weaver and vice versa. Yet while this clearly does not undermine male authority as Modthryth still has to do her father’s bidding, this is indeed in clear defiance of the traditional conventions surrounding a peace-weaver (see, for instance, Fell’s definition of the peace-weaver) much like Dockray-Miller argues. As such, it would seem that Modthryth, despite her history as a vicious and bloodthirsty queen, is perhaps the most successful peace-weaver of all, even though she is not able to fully escape the machinations of men.

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<sup>7</sup> As there is some disagreement amongst scholars as to what Modthryth’s name should be amongst (either Modthryth, Thryth or Fremu, sometimes spelled differently as well), I have changed the names used in quotes to avoid any confusion.

## *The Wife's Lament*

*The Wife's Lament*<sup>8</sup> is perhaps one of the most difficult poems in Anglo-Saxon literature to analyse. Included in the so-called Exeter Book (Exeter Cathedral Library M.S. 3501, dated to the late 10<sup>th</sup> century (Treharne and Pulsiano 8)), its 53 lines have inspired decades' worth of academic debate, some of which will be considered in this study. The focus remains on the importance of marriage, property and power in *The Wife's Lament*, but this study will also consider how these notions tie into the various roles the poem's protagonist occupies: woman, wife and peace-weaver.

### *The Woman*

Very simply put, *The Wife's Lament* seems to be about a woman who laments her own fate after she has been exiled as a direct result of a feud, but most critics cannot even agree on that much (compare, for instance, Robinson, who considers the woman a victim of a feud (290) and Greenfield, who argues that the woman is an adulteress gone into voluntary exile (907)). A summary such as this, however, ignores many of the circumstances presented in the poem which are heavily dependent on interpretation. Yet before delving into the discussion surrounding some of these circumstances, such as the role of the male characters in *The Wife's Lament* and the relation of the woman to these men, it is important to first consider the role of the woman herself in the poem.

Straus, by resorting to speech act theory in her analysis of the poem, argues that it is through speech that the woman acts (335), waylaying any claims that her role is a passive one: "speech itself is action, belying its own apparent passivity" (336). Yet rather than take physical action, the woman is confined to an earth-cave positioned under an oak tree ("The Wife's Lament" l. 28), from where she tells her story. Straus, however, does not consider this lack of physical action to be evident of passivity: "[t]he way the wife tells her story – that is, the way she uses words – reveals that she does not merely passively accept her fate, but rather takes advantage of a form of action available to women of her time" (337). This form of action is of course speech, a means through which a number of women have attempted to exercise their (political) power in Anglo-Saxon poetry; consider, for instance, *Beowulf's* Wealhtheow, who attempts to influence court politics with nothing more than words, or

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<sup>8</sup> The translation of *The Wife's Lament* used is the one by Elaine Treharne (from *Old and Middle English c.890-c.1400*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Ed. Elaine Treharne. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2010. 86-91).

Hildeburh, whose noticeable silence can be considered a reflection of her powerlessness. Moreover, Straus effectively considers the first five lines of the poem to be the woman's claim to agency (337), a notion opposed by critics such as Wentersdorf, who feels that the opening lines are a summary: "[a]n introductory precis (or announcement of topics to be dealt with in the poem) [which] is by no means uncommon in Old English literature"<sup>9</sup> (495). According to Straus, "in the first section the wife asserts both that she will tell her story and that she has a right to do so" (337), citing the repeated use of the word *ic* or 'I' as evidence for this theory: "[t]he sense of the speaker's power is further intensified by the repeated emphasis on the self. In this first section (five lines), the word *ic* is repeated five times, and the narrating 'I' asserts that she will tell a story about herself (*bi me*) and about her own life's journey or fate (*minre sylfre sið*)" (Straus 339). As the woman's narrative progresses, the extent of her suffering becomes all the more clear: betrayal, a journey, exile and separation from her loved one(s) are among the things she mentions as having befallen her. By doing so, Straus argues, the woman "also reveals the way her limited possibilities of action have been decreased" (342). She goes on to explain the following:

The repetition of a single verb *gewat* ('departed') to describe first the husband's departure (*Ærest min hlaford gewat*, ['First my lord went away']) and then the subsequent and consequent departure of the wife (*Da ic me feran gewat folgað secan*, ['Then I left to journey to seek help']) indicates a similar freedom and power to travel . . . Whereas she once had the physical freedom to depart to another area, as her husband did . . . now, in the dwelling where she has been ordered to live . . . that freedom of movement is narrowed to walking within its enclosure. (Straus 342-343)

Wentersdorf opposes this notion, stating that it would be unlikely that the woman's journey had such a specific purpose: instead, he argues, *folgað* could also mean 'refuge' or 'asylum' (498), explaining that "it is much easier to envisage the narrator of [the poem] seeking out a place of safety, an asylum, than to picture her embarking on dangerous travels" (498). While in this context Wentersdorf is discussing the possibility that the woman would have followed her husband, he does argue that travelling in this respect does not necessarily convey a meaning of power and freedom as it does powerlessness. This notion is supported by Bray, who argues that the woman is lost without a man to guide her (150). Yet while Straus claims that the woman is able to display her power through the act of speech itself, Bray argues that it is in the woman's words that her place in society is reflected. The woman, as Bray states,

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<sup>9</sup> To support this claim, Wentersdorf refers to a number of poems in his article such as *The Battle of Brunanburh*, *Vainglory* and *The Wanderer* (495).

“[exhibits] a personal and public grief at the loss of a lord and protector, the loss of status within a martial society, and the loss of that society altogether; such lamentation also reflects the place of women in heroic societies” (151). She later concludes that “[i]n these acts of speaking and of lamentation, the women are accorded a political and social role within the larger male-dominated martial society” (Bray 153). As such, it would seem that the sole power women could acquire for themselves in a heavily patriarchal society like the Anglo-Saxon one was that of speech, one which the woman in *The Wife’s Lament* has also acquired. The question remains, however, what this power means for her.

### *The Wife*

One of the most complicated aspects of *The Wife’s Lament* is the nature of the relationship between the woman and her beloved one(s): an aspect which complicates this is the uncertainty surrounding the male presence in the poem. As Wentersdorf asks, “[i]s the female speaker referring to one man (her husband or her lover), to two men (a first and then a second husband), or even to three men (a husband and a kinsman of the second who accuses the wife of an offence deserving punishment)?” (492). The confusion originates from the ambiguous terms that refer to the men in the poem, such as *hlaford* (lord or husband (“Lord, n.”)) and *freond* (which can mean a number of things including friend, lover, and husband (“Friend, n. and adj.”)), which do little to establish an explicit relationship between the woman and the man or men she mentions. Wentersdorf can eventually no more answer this question than any other critic can, nor are the three options he presents the only three imaginable scenarios. Either way, much as Fell concludes, “whether the *freond* is husband or lover depends on which interpretation of the poem one follows, but either way she is explicitly referring to a close and loving relationship” (69). In fact, critics such as Bray (149), Kinch (136) and Straus (342) seem to be in agreement that this *freond* is her husband. Considering the woman as a wife rather than woman changes her role in the narrative dramatically. As Bray states, “[t]he wife, as a wife, is part of her husband’s household, and necessarily dependent on him. Her desire to find his retinue is as much for her own protection as to satisfy her longing for his company. The actions of his relatives make it abundantly clear that, without him, she is in a vulnerable position” (149).

Yet the question of what the woman’s role as a potential wife in the poem teaches us about marriage and power in Anglo-Saxon England remains. There is one truly remarkable aspect to be discerned in *The Wife’s Lament*: she meets a man with whom she willingly enters into a relationship. It is unclear whether this man is a first or second husband or even a lover,

though critics such as Chance argue that the poem is possibly about an extramarital affair (90). If the poem indeed refers to such a thing, it also clearly demonstrates the consequences of such an affair: the man and woman are both exiled. A number of critics such as Kinch and Straus argue that the last seven lines of the poem are a curse or wish, spoken by the woman so that the man might know the full extent of her suffering (Kinch 146; Straus 350). However, it could also be that, in combination with the gnomic verse that precedes it (lines 42-47), the woman encourages her lover to stay strong, as the messages of these lines seem to be:

just as he must have  
a happy appearance despite the grief in his breast  
of a multitude of perpetual sorrows, whether it is that all his  
joy in the world is at his own disposal, or whether far and wide  
he is outlawed in a distant country (*The Wife's Lament* ll. 43-47)

What is also remarkable is that the woman has acted on her own in choosing her lover, a practice which seems to go against more traditional forms of marriage – even if a woman's consent was required, she did not actively seek out a husband. Furthermore, if we take the woman's social ranking and veneration of her lord into consideration, the circumstances clearly point to a patriarchal society. The woman, however, clearly attempts to challenge the rules that govern such a society by actively seeking out a husband or lover, as evidenced in the words “[t]hen I found for myself a very suited man” (*The Wife's Lament* l. 18). In that case, it could be argued that the poem is an *exemplum* of sorts: going against social conventions will inevitably lead to exile. Finally, there is an important absence of something to be found in the poem: the woman is banished but does not seem to have any property, whether this is monetary or otherwise, and is left to fend for herself. She does not seem to have a morning gift and/or bridegift to dispose of as she wishes either, which could be a direct result of her banishment.

#### *The Peace-weaver*

The third and final role the woman in *The Wife's Lament* could occupy, assuming that she is indeed married, is that of a peace-weaver. This is not a widely supported view, but certainly a plausible one. The poem seems to imply that the woman finds herself in a different region than the one from which she originated: as Wentersdorf argues, “[the woman's] emphatic statement that she had few friends *on þissum londstede* (the region of her husband and his kinsmen) implies that she herself came from another region or land. If she was a foreigner,

she could have been a [*freoðuwebbe*<sup>10</sup>]" (511). He does not, however, expand upon this notion any further. Kinch also implies that the woman is actually a peace-weaver, stating that "she is an exogamous bride, cut off from her own family" (137) and later adding that "it seems more likely that the speaker is referring to a context in which the husband's clan politics have weakened and ultimately destroyed his connection with his peace-bride, who then becomes a liability" (137). Kinch then compares the woman with *Beowulf*'s Freawaru, a woman married off to a presumably hostile tribe in a similar fashion but whose fate will probably also take a turn for the worse, and to whom Kinch does refer explicitly as a peace-weaver (137). Fell's definition, where a peace-weaver would serve to cement peace between "two hostile tribes or families" (37) and where the focal point seems to be "the isolation of such an individual in a society where the protection of her own family has been replaced by the dislike and distrust of those in her new environment" (Fell 37) seems to be applicable here. One of the most important themes in *The Wife's Lament* is of course isolation: "I possessed few dear ones in this region, / loyal friends; because of that my mind is mournful" ("The Wife's Lament" ll. 16-17). Furthermore, the distrust Fell mentions as an important aspect of the peace-weaver's new surroundings is also present in the poem: "[t]he kinsmen of the man began to think, / through secret consideration, that they would separate us" (*The Wife's Lament* ll. 11-12). In light of the woman's possible role as a peace-weaver, it could also be argued that the one of the poem's more problematic lines, "[m]y cruel lord commanded me to be taken here" ("The Wife's Lament" l. 15), could be interpreted in a way that has not often been considered: the 'cruel lord' in question could be the leader of the woman's original people, whom she resents for having been offered to her new tribe as a means of securing their peace treaty.

This notion of resentment is supported by Kinch, who argues that "*The Wife's Lament* measures warrior culture from the perspective of a woman who gets entangled in her husband's clan relations" (136). In this line of reasoning, the woman has not only failed in her purpose as a peace-weaver, but also blames her husband for this. In fact, she comes to loathe not only her husband, but also what he represents: "we hear from the female voice the personal, subjective complaint that the male warrior culture cultivates a disjunction between personal oaths and the public or social oaths that govern the *comitatus*" (Kinch 140). In other words, the good of the clan is placed before the good of the domestic, thus creating a rift between the male (the clan) and the female (the domestic) spheres. As such, Kinch concludes, "[t]he poem argues that a husband intending to commit to an exogamous marriage must treat

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<sup>10</sup> For the sake of coherency I have once more altered the spelling.

that bond as seriously as those reciprocal oaths endemic to the warrior culture” (141). However, Kinch does not take into account the kind words with which the woman refers to her husband, nor the fact that she so clearly places the blame with her husband’s kinsmen, effectively denoting both herself and her husband as victims of their machinations.

## The *Poetic Edda*

The texts encountered in the *Poetic Edda* (most of which have been preserved in the so-called Codex Regius, which has been dated to the 13<sup>th</sup> century) exist of a number of heroic poems and heroic lays. Yet while the overall tone of the *Poetic Edda* can be considered to be somewhat misogynist, its contents are certainly of interest in light of this study. The two female characters for whom marriage plays an important role are Brynhild and Gudrun, who are both eventually (though not simultaneously) betrothed/married to the same man, Sigurd. While Brynhild does not actually marry him, the circumstances surrounding her betrothal and the termination thereof, as well as her continued devotion to Sigurd, place her in a unique position in relation to the concepts of marriage and power: not only does she call for Sigurd's death after she thinks he has betrayed her through his marriage to Gudrun, she commits suicide to follow him to Hell. Gudrun, now widowed, is forced to marry Atli, Brynhild's brother, against her will to make reparations for Brynhild's death so that Atli will not avenge it. This actually places Gudrun in a unique position within the *Poetic Edda* as well: she is forced to marry the brother of the woman who caused her husband's death so that he will not exact his vengeance for his sister's death upon her family. As such, the *Poetic Edda* is of particular interest in relation to the notion and function of marriage, property and female power.

### *Brynhild*

In the *Poetic Edda* Brynhild's exact nature is at best ambiguous. In one poem she is said to be a valkyrie, imprisoned by Odin inside a mountain after she went against his wishes, while in the other she is the daughter of a king and sister to Atli. While the former may seem to be a rather straightforward construct, Quinn argues that Brynhild's punishment is a testament to her power (528): yet while she refers to the valkyrie's ability to choose her own husband, a concept encountered in a number of Eddic poems, it would seem that Brynhild's power and punishment warrant a different explanation. Brynhild has not so much chosen a husband as she has gone against Odin's wishes, thus acting independently in a patriarchal society. As such the nature of such a society perhaps suggests, Brynhild is of course punished and sentenced to sleep until a man who will marry her awakens her. As the focus from here on out is shifted to gaining Brynhild's hand in marriage and the consequences thereof, this study will work under the assumption that Brynhild is both a princess and Atli's sister rather than a

valkyrie, as the latter of the two scenarios no longer plays a significant role in the narrative anymore. Sigurd first hears of Brynhild in the poem entitled “Gripir’s Prophecy.” In this poem Gripir, Sigurd’s uncle, predicts Sigurd’s future adventures and makes Brynhild’s predicament known to Sigurd as well. When Sigurd hears of this, his reaction is as follows: “shall I get the girl, obtain her with a dowry, / that beautiful daughter of the prince?” (“Gripir’s Sayings” 30). Assuming that Larrington’s translation is correct, this is a clear contradiction with what has been discussed in light of the practice of marriage in Norse-Icelandic culture. A dowry certainly points to a marriage through exchange, but it is a price paid to the man by the woman rather than the bride-price, which was paid to the woman by the man. What could explain this is a difference in social status, as “[o]nly individuals who were ‘an equal match’ (*jafnræði*) could marry. The term refers to both social prestige and to wealth, although the sagas suggest that an excess of the latter could compensate for deficiency in the former” (Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* 21). However, whether there is a difference in status is debatable: Brynhild is also the daughter of a king and therefore occupies a similar status as Sigurd. Regardless, it is also foretold that Gudrun’s mother will give him a potion to forget about Brynhild, leaving him free to marry Gudrun instead while Brynhild, as a result of clever trickery, finds herself married to Gunnar. Brynhild soon realises that she has been betrayed; determined to have her revenge, she calls for Sigurd’s death. The actual sentence, however, is carried out by another: Brynhild effectively has no power of her own throughout the entire *Poetic Edda*. Whenever she utters a threat, it is actually her brother Atli who poses the real threat and who inspires fear in others:

Dead was Sigurd on the south side of the Rhine,  
a raven called out loudly from a tree:  
‘Atli will redden his blades in your blood,  
your oaths will destroy you, you warlike men.’ (“Fragment of a Poem about Sigurd”  
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This particular threat is aimed at the Giukings, Gudrun’s family. From the raven’s statement it becomes clear that Atli is the one who gives credence to any threat Brynhild might utter, that he is the one to be feared: Brynhild herself therefore seems to be powerless.

The turning point in Brynhild’s narrative comes in the “Short Poem about Sigurd,” in which she goes to great lengths to explain her motivation: while she has called for Sigurd’s death, it would seem that here she has come to the realisation that he did not willingly betray her. She resolves to end her own life so that she can join Sigurd in the afterlife, but not before making several comments which are of great interest to this study:

And then Atli said to me in private  
that he would never share out the property,  
neither gold nor land, unless I let myself be betrothed,  
nor any portion of my goods and wealth,  
which had been given to me so very young,  
the wealth counted out for me, so very young. (“Short Poem about Sigurd” 36)

It would seem that Brynhild certainly possessed her own property, but that she was denied the right to dispose of it as she pleased. While it is not known whether women in Norse-Icelandic culture were allowed to do so, it was common in Anglo-Saxon England – given the fact that these cultures existed at roughly the same time and the one influenced the other, it is remarkable that there should be a statement in the poem relating to the denial of a woman’s control of her own property. What is also interesting is that Brynhild’s betrothal to Sigurd can most certainly be seen as possibly resulting in an arranged marriage: it was her brother Atli’s desire that she marry Sigurd, after all. Furthermore, if the notion of the sleeping valkyrie as discussed earlier is entertained, it is also the case that Odin decreed that Brynhild marry before she would be released from her punishment, and can therefore be considered an arranged marriage as well. However, what follows is perhaps equally remarkable:

Then my mind was in doubt about this,  
whether I should fight or kill in battle,  
a brave woman in a corslet, against my brother.  
That might become well known among the nations,  
and make strife the lot of many a man.

We reconciled our disagreement;  
I had a greater desire to accept treasure,  
red-gold rings from [Sigurd],  
nor did I wish any other man’s wealth. (“Short Poem about Sigurd” 37-38)

First, Brynhild alludes to going into open rebellion against Atli. This implies the necessity of an army, one which could probably only be acquired through the handing out of property, whether it be land or gold. This then would also imply a certain control over her own property, which clearly contradicts Brynhild’s statements in the earlier discussed verse 36: it was said there that Brynhild was denied control over her property by Atli, yet it is through this property that she would attract an army to her to rebel against her brother. This contradiction and its implications are soon laid to rest, however, as Brynhild decides against open rebellion and instead states that she would like to be betrothed to Sigurd anyway. It is said that he gives her treasure, which in combination with the aforementioned betrothal implies a bride-price or

morning gift of sorts. Furthermore, it seems that this would be paid directly to Brynhild and that she would have direct control over it. As such, the circumstances surrounding Brynhild's betrothal and the power she obtains through the possession of her own property as they are presented to the reader in various poems seem somewhat ambiguous at best.

### *Gudrun*

Little is said in the *Poetic Edda* with regard to Gudrun's marriage to Sigurd: in fact, only its tragic end is thoroughly discussed. Gudrun's marriage to Atli is one which is discussed to far greater length: however, similar to Brynhild's betrothal to Sigurd, the circumstances surrounding Gudrun's marriage to Atli have to be pieced together from various Eddic lays and poems. After Sigurd has been murdered as a result of Brynhild's call for his death, Brynhild commits suicide and follows Sigurd to Hell. It is through her last words that the suggestion of a marriage between Gudrun and Atli is first made. Brynhild states that "[y]ou [Gunnar] must give Gudrun, destroyer of many men, / to some good man, to a marksman; / she will not be happily married, married against her wishes" ("Short Poem about Sigurd" 56 l. 1-3). Here it is mentioned that Gudrun will not willingly marry Atli. In the poems that follow, various scenarios are conveyed which enable the marriage between Gudrun and Atli to take place. In one such poem, it is mentioned that Gudrun is indeed married off to Atli as a means to make amends: "[i]n compensation, [the Giukings] were to marry Gudrun to him, and they had to give her a drink of forgetfulness before she agreed to marry Atli" ("The Death of the Niflungs"). This effectively reduces Gudrun to a bargaining tool with which Atli is placated so that he will not avenge Brynhild's death. However, in another poem Gudrun's mother convinces Gudrun to marry Atli, while at the same time attempting to prevent her from avenging Sigurd's death: "[d]on't try to repay the men's wickedness, / though what we brought about before was evil" ("Second Lay of Gudrun" 28 l. 1-2). Gudrun's mother tries to bribe her daughter with the prospects of Atli's social ranking and even with the promise of property in the form of lands, but also predicts the bleak future Gudrun will have as a spinster. Gudrun finally agrees:

'I'll choose him from among the kings  
coerced into this by my kin;  
he won't be a husband whom I can love  
nor will the fate of my brothers protect my sons' ("Second Lay of Gudrun" 34)

In one scenario Gudrun seems to be unaware of her family's motives, while in another she is fully aware that she is being forced into a marriage she does not want. Regardless, the result remains the same: Atli murders Gudrun's brothers and Gudrun avenges them by slaying Atli. It is here that her story becomes similar to that of *Beowulf's* Hildeburh: Gudrun, too, is trapped in the middle of a conflict between her husband and her family. However, her role is not a passive one like Hildeburh's: Gudrun sides with her family and takes her revenge on Atli, even murdering their children as she does so. Gudrun then goes on to marry King Ionakr, but again little to nothing is said about their marriage and so shall not be discussed.

What remains questionable, however, is the function of Gudrun's marriages in the *Poetic Edda*. The general tone of the *Poetic Edda* towards women is one of misogyny, and Gudrun is one of two who can be seen entering into an arranged marriage, and who actively takes revenge for the wrongs that have been done unto her. Yet while tragedy is not an uncommon theme in the *Poetic Edda*, Gudrun's is the only which is lamented to such a great extent. At any rate, there are two things that can be said about Gudrun's marriage to Atli. First of all, her readiness to marry him depends on her awareness of the circumstances: the drink of forgetfulness mentioned in "The Death of the Niflungs" easily removes any objections Gudrun may have had to the marriage, but it is clear that in the other poems Gudrun marries Atli against her will. What is interesting, however, is that her consent is required in either scenario – apparently her family is in no position to simply marry Gudrun to Atli and be done with it. Secondly, offering Atli Gudrun's hand in marriage to make amends for his sister's death is reminiscent of the act of paying an (often unspecified) amount of money so as to buy off someone's death to either a lord or next of kin. This practice is mentioned several times in the *Poetic Edda*, but is also featured in Anglo-Saxon literature where it is referred to as *wergild*. The reduction of Gudrun to something akin to this effectively transforms her into a political tool which, through marriage, serves to avoid greater catastrophe, a practice highly reminiscent of peaceweaving. However, perhaps that is not all there is to it: Gudrun's marriage to Atli can also be construed as a warning. As Quinn states, "a simple implication to be drawn from the tangled plots of the eddic heroic poems is that a marriage arranged by deception or against a woman's will does not bode well for wife, husband, or the children that will be sacrificed, directly or indirectly, to the vengeance imperative" (527).

## The *Nibelungenlied*

No study into Germanic heroic poetry would be complete without a discussion of the *Nibelungenlied*, a poem of which a number of variants<sup>11</sup> have been preserved in no less than thirty-five manuscripts, some of which date back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In the last couple of decades a lot of research has been conducted into the role of women in this poem: for instance, critics such as Andersson and Gildersleeve have analysed the role of Brünhild to a great extent, especially in relation to earlier renditions of her legend (such as in the *Poetic Edda*), whereas others like Ehrismann have analysed that of Kriemhild. Pafenberg, Ferrante and Frakes have discussed the importance of gender and have tied the importance of personal property into this. However, there has been little research which ties the importance of gender and property together with the notion of marriage in relation to the poem's two main female characters, Brünhild and Kriemhild.

### *Brünhild*

Brünhild's struggle in the *Nibelungenlied* begins with the Burgundian king Gunther's bridal quest. He hears tell of a number of available women and immediately desires to marry one: "[t]idings never heard before had crossed the Rhine, telling how, beyond it, there lived many lovely maidens. Good King Gunther conceived the idea of winning one, and his heart thrilled at the thought of it" (*Nibelungenlied* 53). Gunther sets his sights on Brünhild, an Icelandic queen who competes with all who set out to win her love in three games. Whoever wins these games gains "her love as the prize" (*Nibelungenlied* 53), or rather, her hand in marriage. One of Gunther's vassals, Hagen, advises against this and proposes that the mighty prince Siegfried joins them in their quest. Gunther asks Siegfried to accompany him, promising him his loyalty in return. Siegfried, however, asks for a reward of a different kind: Kriemhild's hand in marriage. Gunther agrees and arrangements are made for Gunther's party, which includes himself, Siegfried, Hagen and Dancwart (Hagen's younger brother and vassal to Giselher, Gunther's brother), to depart for Isenstein, Brünhild's fortress. What is interesting in this passage is that women here are presented as objects capable of being won as though they were trophies. This is especially true for Brünhild, whose affections can be won through, in this case, military prowess, a field Brünhild excels in and which will provide her with a presumably well-suited man but which nevertheless defines her as an object. As Lienert

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<sup>11</sup> The variant this study refers to is known as the so-called manuscript C.

writes, “[g]rundsätzlich werden Frauen, selbst königliche, von den Männern als quasi ‘naturliche’ Objekte männlichen Begehrens begafft, als Kampfpfeis oder Belohnung in Aussicht gestellt und vergeben” (6). Gunther and Siegfried resort to deceit in order to gain their prospective brides: Siegfried takes with him his *Tarnkappe*, a magic cloak through which he gains the strength of twelve men and which renders him invisible (*Nibelungenlied* 54), so that he can trick and defeat Brünhild. Their subsequent deception during the competition with Brünhild, during which Siegfried uses his *Tarnkappe* to make himself invisible and competes alongside Gunther so that the latter seems all the more formidable, serves a particular purpose: Gildersleeve notes that “Siegfried’s successful trickery in winning [Brünhild] for Gunther evidently gratified the poet extremely, and he narrates it with uncton, never suggesting that it was at all dishonourable” (364). Millet expands upon this, stating that “[Siegfried] aber erobert [Brünhild] nicht für sich, sondern für Gunther, der nicht der Beste ist under solcher Taten unfähig gewesen wäre” (197), effectively providing Gunther and Siegfried with a justification for their behaviour and its consequences: their deception would never have been necessary had Gunther not been weak.

Once Brünhild is defeated, she is denied her property and with that her power as queen. According to Frakes, “the struggle by Brünhild and Kriemhild to maintain personal independence depends directly on their own power and ability to reward those who perform service for them as dictated by the feudal social formation, and thus on their ownership or control of property” (47). Yet as can be seen throughout the *Nibelungenlied* they are both studiously denied this. Before Brünhild and the Burgundian party depart for Worms, she intends to hand out some of her treasure to both the Burgundians as well as her own household. Dancwart volunteers himself for this task instead and nearly depletes Brünhild’s treasury: “[w]hen Hagen’s brother had taken charge of the keys he lavished magnificent gifts; and if any asked for a mark he gave them so much that all who were poor and needy could live happily on it” (*Nibelungenlied* 73). Brünhild is not happy with this and demands that Gunther stops him:

‘My lord King,’ said that proud lady, ‘I could do without your treasurer’s generosity, since he intends not to leave me a stitch and is frittering away all my gold. I should be eternally obliged to any who would put a stop to it. This knight is lavishing such gifts that he must fancy I am thinking of dying! But I mean to keep my money and I trust *myself* to squander my inheritance.’ (*Nibelungenlied* 74)

According to Pafenberg, “Brünhild is aware that the distribution of her wealth to the subjects of Iceland is meant to reduce drastically her political power, to a level below even that at

death” (108). However, Hagen strongly disagrees with Brünhild. He tells her that there is no need for her to take any of her money or clothes with her and that Gunther is more than able to provide for her: “a consolation which makes clear that a woman’s wealth and power is to be subordinated to a man’s” (Pafenberg 109). Brünhild ultimately takes very little with her and signs her lands over to a regent: as such, she appears to have lost nearly all of her property before travelling to Worms. As Ferrante notes, “[Brünhild] shifts from being a powerful queen, who not only rules her own land but defeats all male suitors in tests of strength, to being the impotent consort of a weak king” (215), a conclusion which is also supported by Lienert (7-8). However, Ferrante seems to attach little importance to the deception that precedes this incredible loss of power. It stands to reason that, had Gunther and Siegfried not resorted to their deception, Brünhild may never have been defeated – or at least not at the hands of Gunther – and may have remained a queen in her own right with full possession of her realm and property.

The turning point in the narrative, which also marks Brünhild’s rise to power, takes place during a confrontation between Brünhild and Kriemhild. Brünhild questions Siegfried’s social ranking, still believing him to be Gunther’s vassal as he had introduced himself as such during their first encounter in Isenstein. In turn, Kriemhild attempts to convince Brünhild of Siegfried’s royal status. Brünhild believes herself to be Kriemhild’s superior, after which Kriemhild announces that she will enter the minster before Brünhild, the queen of Burgundy, does, thinking herself Brünhild’s equal and thus having every right to do so. The two separate and meet again outside of the minster, where neither one of them backs down. Brünhild cites proper protocol, stating that she should be the first to enter. Kriemhild, however, questions Brünhild’s penchant for protocol, referring to another event which preceded their confrontation by stating that it was Siegfried, the supposed vassal, who subdued her one night rather than Gunther. Gunther was unable to bed Brünhild on their wedding night as he was too weak to overcome her – Siegfried went in his place the following night and overcame her<sup>12</sup>, taking with him a ring and girdle for Kriemhild, objects Hasty considers to be “symbolic of [Brünhild’s] power” (89). Brünhild asks for proof and Kriemhild produces the ring and girdle: humiliated, Brünhild calls for Gunther and the other lords, tells them what has happened and demands justice. Gunther, however, declares Siegfried to be innocent and the matter is put to rest. Hagen, on the other hand, swears to avenge this injustice and is quick to

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<sup>12</sup> The events of that night, however, can at best be described as ambiguous: it is not at all clear what exactly transpires between Brünhild and Siegfried. The lack of comment from either a character or the *Nibelungenlied*-poet himself only leaves the reader guessing: as research into this would essentially amount to an altogether new and different study, it shall therefore not be discussed here.

convince Gunther of the considerable (financial) benefits of Siegfried's death. As Lienert points out, women are at the heart of acts of revenge in the *Nibelungenlied*, but men are the ones to actually carry it out (14). This is somewhat in line with what is said in the narrative itself, where women are clearly blamed for the misery that follows. In fact, the chapter or *Âventiure* ends with the following words: "[t]he King followed his vassal Hagen's advice, to evil effect, and those rare knights began to set afoot the great betrayal before any might discover it, so that, thanks to the wrangling of two women, countless warriors met their doom" (*Nibelungenlied* 118). Perhaps one of the most remarkable aspects of this passage is the fact that Brünhild and Kriemhild are so explicitly blamed for the events that transpire throughout the remainder of the *Nibelungenlied*, while it could also be argued that both Gunther's and Siegfried's marriages are based on greed and lies and that it is precisely this that causes not only what could be considered to be the greatest conflict in the narrative, but is also that which sets the remainder of the tragedy in motion: "[h]ere, then, lie the actual roots of the tragedy of the Nibelungs. The quarrel of the women threatens to lead to the discovery of this deceit. So Gunther must at all costs see to it that the truth will never come out" (de Vries 65), a conclusion shared by Westphal-Wihl (474).

Another interesting aspect, however, is the power struggle between Brünhild and Kriemhild as well as what this struggle represents. Pafenberg considers the struggle to reflect "not the personal integrity of the women but above all their social and political status. Both women, by nature wilful but each robbed of her inheritance and political independence, remain dependent on their spouses and trade words for wont of swords" (110). Müller, on the other hand, sees the *Nibelungenlied* as an ongoing struggle between love and conflict (76), a notion supported by Gentry (68-69) and Hasty (80), and sees the confrontation between Brünhild and Kriemhild as the culmination of this struggle: "[i]m Streit der Königinnen kommt die latente Gewalt zum Ausbruch" (Müller 82). He considers the confrontation to be one in which both queens question each other's legitimacy, which destroys the pretence that has so far been maintained through Siegfried's and Gunther's lies (Müller 82). What is interesting, however, is that Müller does not directly link these two major themes of love and conflict to the two queens. It could be argued that the two queens personify these themes: Brünhild represents conflict in the sense of war, having been depicted as a warrior queen capable of ruling her own estate some chapters before. Brünhild is also at the source of another great conflict in the *Nibelungenlied*, namely Siegfried's death and its consequences. Kriemhild, then, represents (courtly) love: not only is she linked to court through her brothers, she is also worshipped from a distance by Siegfried, who carries out a number of tasks in

order to gain her hand in marriage (Ehrismann 20). The confrontation between the queens as well as its aftermath seems to be decided in favour of Kriemhild and of love, however, yet conflict remains continuously present in the background. Hagen's plans to avenge Brünhild mark Brünhild's rise to power: the injustice exacted upon her is avenged by murdering Siegfried. Brünhild also fades from the narrative when this has been accomplished. According to Weigand, this is because Brünhild has set in motion a chain of events that will continue without her presence: "[m]it der Wahl dieses ersten Racheopfers [Siegfried] hat Brünhild einen Mechanismus in Gang gesetzt, der ihre persönliche Beteiligung an der Geschichte von da an nicht mehr verlangt" (254). However, it could be reasoned that this happens because her part is played out in full: the injustice incurred upon her is avenged, so there is no longer any reason for her to be present in the remainder of the narrative. Furthermore, Brünhild is also one of the few to still be alive at the end of the *Nibelungenlied*, which could imply that the vengeance exacted on her behalf was just (Weigand 258) or that she is blameless: it is important to keep in mind that, unlike in the original Eddic counterparts of the *Nibelungenlied*, Brünhild is not explicitly stated to be the inciter – she does not call for vengeance, it is merely exacted on her behalf (Gildersleeve 365). Weigand, on the other hand, does seem to think Brünhild actively seeks revenge and has a somewhat larger part to play in Siegfried's death (254). Either way, conflict seems to be triumphant in the end: Siegfried is murdered, which also marks the death of love and the courtly (Müller 84), after which Kriemhild is free to take Brünhild's place as personification of conflict (Frakes 20; Pafenberg 109).

### *Kriemhild*

Siegfried's vassalage, as discussed earlier, serves as a means to deceive Brünhild – yet she is not the only victim of this deceit. Campbell argues that the deception was not only vital with regard to the winning of Brünhild, but also that Siegfried "clearly sees [this] as service to Kriemhild, as 'Minnedienst'<sup>13</sup>" (565), a notion also supported by Andersson (223), Müller (75) and Weigand (255). Lienert, however, disagrees with them, stating that Kriemhild "ist nicht Minnerherin, sondern Tauschobjekt der Männer" (7). She later adds that "Frauendienst ist nur Fassade" (21). Hasty and Haustein argue along similar lines: to gain Kriemhild's hand in marriage Siegfried resorts to tricking another woman into marriage with Gunther, telling him that he does so for his own sake rather than Gunther's (Hasty 87; Haustein 381). In other

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<sup>13</sup> *Minnedienst* here refers to the notion of courtly love.

words, there is no mention of *Minnedienst*: Kriemhild is rather a commodity to be gained by aiding Gunther in his quest to gain Brünhild as wife. Kriemhild is only told of Gunther's promise to Siegfried until after the fact, and when Gunther implores Kriemhild to uphold his oath he gives her little choice in the matter: "[o]f your own goodness, redeem my royal oath for me! For I swore to give you to a warrior, and if he becomes your husband you will have done my will most loyally" (*Nibelungenlied* 85). The emphasis here seems to be on loyalty: Gunther asks Kriemhild to do as he tells her, but only after he has already promised her to him. Whatever choice in the matter Kriemhild may have had has been taken from her by doing so. Yet regardless of which explanation is favoured, it would seem that deception lies at the root of not only Brünhild's marriage to Gunther, but also at that of Kriemhild's marriage to Siegfried.

In comparison to Brünhild, Kriemhild fares little better at the start of her marriage to Siegfried: according to Ferrante, "Kriemhild also attempts to assert her feudal rights. She claims her share of the family lands and men, but her husband refuses the lands, though he lets her take the men" (215). Pafenberg expands upon this notion, adding that "[w]ith her marriage to Siegfried, however, Kriemhild gains the opportunity to broaden her responsibilities and increase her political and social status. Moreover, she sees her marriage and departure from Worms as the chance to secure power within the Burgundian realm" (110). When Siegfried wishes to return to Xanten, her brothers offer Kriemhild her rightful inheritance, which consists of lands and castles. Siegfried answers in her stead, and his words leave little room for interpretation: "[t]ruly, my dear wife can forgo the portion you wished to give her" (*Nibelungenlied* 95). Kriemhild's response is rather curt: "[y]ou may well renounce my inheritance . . . but it will not be so easy where knights of Burgundy are concerned. They are such as a king may gladly take home to his country and I request my dear brothers to make division of them with me" (*Nibelungenlied* 96). While Ferrante and Pafenberg argue that Kriemhild's power is effectively diminished as a result of male interference, Ehrismann seems to think differently: Kriemhild forgoes her inheritance in favour of love (22-23). However, since Siegfried is the one who actively refuses the Burgundian estates, this explanation is somewhat unsatisfactory. What is also striking in this passage regarding Kriemhild's inheritance is that monetary gains are gladly foregone, but that additional military strength is something which is gladly accepted. However, it is clear that Kriemhild, like Brünhild, is destined to go to her new home without any financial power whatsoever.

Following Siegfried's death, the *Nibelungenlied* becomes a story of revenge. Kriemhild swears to avenge her husband's death but does not gain any foothold with her brothers. Even when she confronts Hagen with his actions by letting him stand next to Siegfried's corpse, whose wounds begin to bleed again as is said to happen whenever the murderer stands nearby (*Nibelungenlied* 137), Hagen is not formally accused. Moreover, Kriemhild has not only lost her husband, she is also denied her rightful inheritance, the Nibelung treasure, by Hagen. According to Ehrismann, this marks the second occasion during which Kriemhild "has been robbed of the protection of her husband" (29), the first being his death. The Nibelung hoard is effectively Kriemhild's morning gift – through it, Kriemhild is able to attract an army to her, and instead of allowing Kriemhild continued access to her inheritance Hagen sinks it in the Rhine for fear of her wrath: "[n]ow that Kriemhild had possession of the hoard she lured many foreign warriors to Burgundy . . . Kriemhild was now showering such largesse on rich and poor alike that Hagen declared that were she to live for any time she would recruit so many men that matters would go ill with the Burgundians" (*Nibelungenlied* 148). As Pafenberg states, "[b]y sinking the treasure, Hagen forces Kriemhild into financial and political bankruptcy: she is, in effect, disinherited a second time" (110), a conclusion shared by Westphal-Wihl (474) and possibly also a reflection on the decrease of female power that took place in German society from the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Frakes expands upon Kriemhild's loss of power, stating that "[t]he legal owner of the property in question is Kriemhild, as both the characters . . . and modern scholars agree. Nonetheless it is the men who decide, allow, prevent, countermand, overrule, distribute, and receive the distributed money" (83). At one point it is implied that the return of the Nibelung treasure would have meant that Kriemhild may have forgiven Hagen, but as he continually denies her ownership of her morning gift this does not happen (Müller 88; Weigand 244). Once again powerless, Kriemhild spends thirteen years mourning Siegfried's death. A solution presents itself, however, in the form of a marriage with King Etzel, through which Kriemhild can gain both property and power:

'Now that I have won so many allies,' thought the faithful [Kriemhild], 'poor wretch, I shall let people say what they like. For who knows whether my dear husband may not yet be avenged? Since Etzel has so many fighting-men,' she thought further, 'if I am to have command of them I shall achieve whatever I wish. Moreover, he is so very rich that I shall again have the means to attract warriors by gifts after being robbed of all I owned by Hagen, curse him!' (*Nibelungenlied* 162)

In her thirst for revenge, Kriemhild has effectively replaced Brünhild: “[u]nwissend und unmerklich hat sie den Racheauftrag gegen die Betrüger von ihrer vermeintlichen Rivalin übernommen” (Weigand 255). However, unlike Brünhild, Kriemhild goes to great lengths to be able to exact her vengeance. As Pafenberg writes, “[o]nce again reduced to a woman in heroic isolation, Kriemhild gives her one possession of value, her body, to Etzel in exchange for the possibility of regaining her property and executing revenge on those who stole her wealth, political stature, and her love” (110). According to Lienert, this too proves that women are able to wield their power and exact their revenge through men: through her marriage with Etzel, Kriemhild gains enough power to put her plans into motion (16). As such, Kriemhild is ultimately successful in luring Hagen and her brothers to Hungary and takes her revenge on them much like Hagen predicted. What is interesting, however, is how much Kriemhild is willing to sacrifice in order to avenge Siegfried’s death: she bides her time, waiting for thirteen years for an opportunity to present itself. Then, much like Pafenberg suggests, she gives herself to Etzel in order to be able to take revenge (110), an action which implies that she attaches little value to her own person. However, she also makes sure the conflict escalates by wilfully sacrificing her son, Gunther, who dies at the hands of Hagen. She sends countless warriors to their deaths and even loses her own life after she murders Hagen. What is also interesting is that Kriemhild apparently favours her bond to Siegfried through marriage over her bond with her family: this is the exact opposite of that which has been seen in literature from other cultures and eras, in which family was valued over marital kin as is demonstrated in, for instance, the *Poetic Edda* when Gudrun decides to side with her family and murders her husband, Atli, instead.

There are, however, a number of interesting aspects about Kriemhild’s final quest for revenge. First, there is a strange occurrence in Kriemhild’s behaviour as she welcomes Hagen and her brothers to Hungary: after it has completely vanished from the narrative after having been sunk in the Rhine by Hagen, Kriemhild suddenly enquires after the Nibelung hoard. As Weigand notes, “[p]lötzlich geht es offensichtlich nicht merh um die Rache für den Tod Siegfrieds allein, sondern der geraubte Hort tritt ins Zentrum von Kriemhilds Forderungen” (244). The reason behind this remains unclear: while it could be argued that Kriemhild is claiming what is rightfully hers, the treasure can no longer have any purpose for her as she has already come to rely on Etzel’s wealth to gain sufficient power. Financial independence has, for the time being, lost its purpose. Ehrismann argues that Kriemhild’s request “implies an identification of Siegfried and the hoard” (31), which would mean that Kriemhild is attempting to recover something from her past to which she has a sentimental attachment of

sorts. Another purpose the Nibelung hoard can serve is to provide Hagen with a means to save his life (Müller 88; Weigand 244), but this would nullify Kriemhild's motivations in her quest for revenge. Secondly, it is also interesting that Kriemhild's final act of vengeance (murdering Hagen) is not carried out until she has regained Siegfried's sword, Balmung. Ehrismann argues that Siegfried is inextricably linked to Balmung like he is to the Nibelung hoard: "Siegfried – this is the only way the symbolism of the sword can be understood – kills Hagen, and no one but Kriemhild, being one with Siegfried, could become the instrument for this symbolic action" (34). However, Ehrismann overlooks the meaning this carries for Kriemhild. It is not until she regains some of Siegfried's property that she murders Hagen, thus completing her act of revenge:

‘You have repaid me in base coin,’ she said, ‘but Siegfried’s sword I shall have and hold! My fair lover was wearing it when I last saw him, through whom I suffered mortal sorrow at your hands.’ She drew it from its sheath – he was powerless to prevent it – and bent her thoughts to robbing him of life. She raised it in both hands – and struck of his head! (Nibelungenlied 290)

What directly precedes this passage is that Kriemhild asks Hagen one final time for the Nibelung treasure. He refuses to hand it over to her, thus denying her her rights as a widow and any power she may gain through it and essentially forfeiting his own life. However, by taking something formerly belonging to Siegfried from Hagen, in this case Balmung, Kriemhild effectively regains enough of her past to overcome and dispose of Hagen. It could therefore be argued that the act is not necessarily symbolic, but that Kriemhild needed to regain some of the power she enjoyed as Siegfried's wife in order to overcome Hagen, one of the champions of the Burgundian court. It is also striking that Kriemhild dies shortly after having done so. Hildebrand (the tutor of Dietrich, a hero residing at Etzel's court) avenges Hagen's death and murders Kriemhild: "[h]e leapt at Kriemhild in fury and struck the Queen with a heavy swing of his sword. She winced in dread of Hildebrand – but what could her loud shrieks avail her? There lay the bodies of all that were doomed to die. The noble lady was hewn in pieces" (*Nibelungenlied* 291). Surprisingly, Hildebrand's deed goes unpunished. While it is reasonable to argue that Kriemhild's vengeance is completed after she murders Hagen, this does not fully explain the reason behind her own death. It could be said that upon the completion of her vengeance, Kriemhild's purpose in the narrative was fulfilled and that she needed to disappear from it much like Brünhild did. It could also be argued that Kriemhild's death is a punishment for trespassing into the heroic world by murdering a man (Pafenberg 111). Lienert, for instance, also states that Kriemhild has to die because she, a

woman, has murdered a man, and also provides an explanation for Hildebrand's actions: "[d]ie tötende Frau, vor allem die Frau, die den größten Helden erschlägt, wird zum Skandalon für alle Männer, sogar für den eigenen. Daher darf Hildebrand sie straflos in Stücke hauen" (17). If this is the reason behind Kriemhild's death, it could also be argued that her death can be considered a clear delineation of what is allowed with regard to the female role in a patriarchal society, even more so because Brünhild, another queen who was ultimately to blame for the death of a man, has been allowed to live: the difference here lies in the actual performance of the deed. The injustice Brünhild suffered has been avenged by a man, whereas Kriemhild takes matters into her own hands. Yet perhaps something altogether different can be said about the ending of the *Nibelungenlied* with regard to the role of Brünhild and Kriemhild. According to Ferrante, "the story also suggests that if you rob women of the rights and powers they are entitled to, they will find other ways to assert those rights and powers that may be far more harmful to society" (215). Pafenberg, on the other hand, suggests that the *Nibelungenlied* has a less feminist outlook on women's rights than Ferrante proposes, despite its break with tradition in Kriemhild's rise to power and assumption of a warrior's role when she murders Hagen:

In regard to gender definitions, the *Nibelungenlied* is a nostalgic text, a thirteenth-century attempt to revive a warrior's 'golden age' and with it, a heroic definition of feudal relations, warrior kingship, masculinity, and femininity . . . However, despite all attempts to transform heroic norms, particularly gender norms, at the *Nibelungenlied's* conclusion, the heroic gender definitions are reaffirmed. (Pafenberg 111)

## Marriage, Property and Female Power in Germanic Heroic Poetry

As has been demonstrated, using marriage as a means of securing a political alliance and the continuation of a dynasty was not an uncommon practice in Anglo-Saxon England. However, using marriage as a way to secure peace between two hostile tribes may have been a lot less common – the role of the so-called *freoðuwebbe* or peace-weaver seems to be largely fictional. It is therefore remarkable that there are a number of examples of the practice of peaceweaving to be found within both *The Wife's Lament* and *Beowulf*. While there are some doubts amongst scholars as to which characters can be called peace-weavers, the wife from *The Wife's Lament* as well as *Beowulf's* Hildeburh, Freawaru, Wealhtheow and Modthryth are adequate examples of one. *The Wife's Lament* seems to reflect on the tragic consequences of a failed marriage, where the woman is banished and left without any property or power. Her words are the only way in which she can express herself and relate the wrongs that have been exacted upon her, an interesting insight not only into the woman's role as a peace-weaver, but also into her role as a woman and wife in a patriarchal Anglo-Saxon society as well. *Beowulf*, on the other hand, presents the reader with four peace-weavers, some doomed to failure while others are more successful. Hildeburh's story is one of loss and of the peace-weaver's conflicted loyalties to both her husband and to her family. It serves to illustrate the conflict between the heroic world and the female, which permeates the entire narrative and of which the former seems to triumph over the latter. Hildeburh is finally carried off as though she were the spoils of war, a commodity rather than a woman. Freawaru fares only slightly better as the consequences of her performance as peace-weaver are not known to the reader yet. It is implied, however, that she too will fail, and that she will most likely find herself in a situation similar to Hildeburh's. Wealhtheow is portrayed as a seemingly powerless woman, but at the same time is the only one who foresees a potential threat to Hrothgar's dynasty. Her name, which loosely translates as 'foreign slave,' seems to delineate her potential: while she attempts to wield her influence, she is subordinate to men. Finally there is Modthryth, a cruel woman who is tamed only through her marriage and becomes the only successful peace-weaver encountered in this study. Yet she too falls victim to the political machinations of men as her marriage is an arranged one, and is therefore perhaps no more successful than her fellow peace-weavers.

Old Norse society seems to have viewed marriage differently from Anglo-Saxon society in that, up until its conversion to Christianity, women had few rights and little say in

who they would marry. Arranged marriages or marriages that otherwise took place against the woman's will were presumably commonplace. Brynhild's betrothal to Sigurd seems to have been motivated by either Odin's decree or greed on Atli's behalf, but her feelings towards Sigurd would nowadays most likely be considered genuine. However, throughout the *Poetic Edda* she is continuously denied power, loses Sigurd and ultimately resolves to kill herself so she can join him in the afterlife. If Brynhild's betrothal to Sigurd can be considered an arranged marriage in that it was a necessity, it too has ended badly. Another example of such an arranged marriage in the *Poetic Edda* is that between Gudrun and Atli, the analysis of which is slightly complicated by the fact that it is presented through a number of different poems. Much like Hildeburh's story, Gudrun's marriage revolves around a conflict between her husband and her family as well. As Gudrun is offered to Atli as compensation for his sister's death, Gudrun too is reduced to a commodity, a means through which a greater catastrophe can be avoided.

As far as the *Nibelungenlied* is concerned, it would seem it is an adequate reflection on the importance of female power in German society at the time. Both Brünhild and Kriemhild are objectified by the men in the narrative: the former as though she were a prize to be won, the latter a commodity to be exchanged in favour of another. Both Gunther and Siegfried resort to deceit when it comes to their respective bridal quests and, once conquered, it becomes clear that both Brünhild and Kriemhild are denied everything from which even a semblance of power can be gleaned – as such, both Brünhild and Kriemhild become fully dependent on their husbands. The turning point in the narrative comes in the form of the confrontation between Brünhild and Kriemhild, which marks Brünhild's rise to power in the narrative. The *Nibelungenlied* poet is quick to blame women for the events that follow the confrontation between Brünhild and Kriemhild, but it could also be argued that both Gunther's and Siegfried's greed and deceit lie at the heart of this. Following Siegfried's death, Kriemhild embarks upon a quest not only to avenge Siegfried's death, but also to regain her property and, through it, her power. She continually demands the return of her morning gift, the Nibelung hoard, which would enable her to regain sufficient power to exact her revenge. This is denied her, however, and so she looks for an alternative and finds it in the shape of a marriage with King Etzel. This marriage, which can only be considered to be a political move in which Kriemhild effectively exchanges herself for property, enables her to gain enough financial and military power, and so she is free to seek her revenge. When the Burgundians arrive in Hungary, she embarks upon a mission to regain something of her past. She asks Hagen to return her morning gift, which he denies her again. In its place Kriemhild regains

Siegfried's sword, Balmung: now that she has regained at least one thing from her past which she identifies with Siegfried, Kriemhild completes her revenge and murders Hagen. However, her transgression into the heroic world does not go unpunished and she is in turn murdered by Hildebrand, which reaffirms the clear segregation between the male and female world in the *Nibelungenlied*.

## Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine the parallels between the female characters in four Germanic heroic (elegiac) poems, namely those of the woman in *The Wife's Lament*, Hildeburh, Freawaru, Wealhtheow and Modthryth in *Beowulf*, Brünhild and Kriemhild in the *Nibelungenlied*, and Brynhild and Gudrun in a number of lays and poems collected in the *Poetic Edda*. It has been argued that these nine women develop along similar lines, that they are ultimately all of them victims of circumstance, and that they as such represent an archetype of a woman suffering at the hands of male oppression. The literary role of women has also been compared with that of the women in Proto-Indo-European, Anglo-Saxon, Norse-Icelandic and Germanic society in order to better understand the role of women in these societies as well as its literary representation as far as marriage, property and female power are concerned.

In conclusion, it can be said that women in every society and every literary representation thereof as discussed in this study were perceived as tools through which male personal gain could be achieved. Marriage served as a means through which alliances were made and through which crises were averted, but the women were often left with little to no personal property and, as a direct consequence of this, often found themselves powerless to change their fates. As far as *The Wife's Lament*, *Beowulf*, the *Poetic Edda* and the *Nibelungenlied* are concerned, it would seem that the stories of the women in question develop along similar lines: with the exception of Modthryth, who effectively serves as an example of how arranged marriages should turn out, all women face loss and tragedy and there is no happy ending for either of them. Yet all nine women are the victims of male political machinations, regardless of how they ultimately fare. Female subordination to men is therefore key to this study: even the most accomplished woman amongst those discussed, Modthryth, owes her success to a man.

Future research into the importance of marriage, property and female power in Germanic heroic (elegiac) poetry may benefit from a larger scale of inquiry. Only four poems have been discussed in this study, and it may be that those which have not been examined shed a different light upon it entirely: as such, this study is by no means representative for the entire Germanic corpus. Furthermore, future research could also benefit from the inclusion of a larger amount of academic publications on the topics discussed. Due to a lack of availability

of many of these publications in the Netherlands it could be that a number of important findings have been overlooked.

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